

# Commentary

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## I'm tired of trashy politics, and I won't take it anymore

**F**our years ago, I was asked to write a post-mortem on the 2000 presidential campaign. It appeared in the *American-Statesman* on the day after the election and was titled "The end of an uninspiring campaign." The drama of the Florida vote-count fiasco is what sticks now in most of our minds, but campaign 2004 has given me queasy feelings of déjà vu, so I checked back.



Sure enough. Unless things change, campaign 2004 will have the same effects as campaign 2000 — the rotten taste of elections run as exercises in ad-

vertising and packaging and spin; strong divisions encouraged and exploited among citizens of different political views, classes, ages, genders, sexual orientations, religions, income levels and regional backgrounds; and pandering to the selfish concerns of individual voters rather than encouraging thoughts about the common good.

This should come as no surprise, given that Karl Rove has masterminded the campaign for President Bush in both elections. Instead of exploring the real issues that should concern us, we are caught up in personality issues. Anyone remember all the senseless fuss about Al Gore's woodenness? Is President Bush really in touch with the working class because he wears an open collar, speaks English not so good and chops wood on his Crawford ranch? Is Dick Cheney really sure terrorists will attack us if John Kerry is elected?

Is single-mindedness of vision the mark of a good leader? Is it firm and unwavering determination to see policies through? Or is it a myopic inability to understand and adjust to complex and changing circumstances? Is flip-flopping a lack of commitment to values? Or is it the natural result of a 20-year career as a U.S. senator studying and voting on issues in an ever-changing world?

Back in the year 2000, I reported that David Walker, comptroller general of the United States, an appointee of Presidents Reagan, Bush and Clinton, had criticized both candidates for not addressing the staggering economic problems this country would face in year 2011, when the first baby boomers reach age 65.

Not only has that still not happened four years later — and conditions contributing to the economic disaster Walker predicted have only deteriorated — but we now are running a

costly and bloody war — aka "mission accomplished" — with no end in sight. The annual federal deficit has hit an all-time record. Yet our conservative vice president breezily tells us not to worry. Next year's projected large addition to the deficit should not be record-setting.

What can we do? Here is my opinion, or rather that of Sam the Lion in "The Last Picture Show." We should all say firmly his true Texan words: "I've been around that trashy behavior all my life. I'm getting tired of putting up with it."

Let's accept that a candidate who attends elite Yale University and then volunteers to serve as a soldier anywhere in Vietnam is a manipulating careerist with no sense of duty. Let's accept that his later impassioned testimony before congressional hearings at a time when even the president of the United States was seeking ways of extracting us from Vietnam was cowardly and uncomradely.

Let's accept that former Texas Lt. Gov. Ben Barnes is a politically motivated liar. He does not now regret helping the other candidate, from the same educational and social milieu, avoid service in Vietnam by joining the Texas Air National Guard. And let's even accept that working state-side on a political campaign and being grounded for failure to perform routine National Guard duties showed courageous respect for the men being drafted, volunteering, serving and dying in Vietnam.

Finally, let's accept that flip-flopping with the American people about the motives for going to war in the Middle East showed honest resolve.

Let's put aside all that trashy stuff and ask the candidates and their handlers to focus on the real issues. We could start with two main sets of questions.

What is the economic picture for the next decade, factoring in the 2011 time bomb and the costs of the war in Iraq and the "unwinnable" war on terror? Where are the new jobs created by the Bush tax-cut trickle down going to come from, and what sorts of jobs will they be? How will we curtail the deficit?

What is the strategy for an "end game" in Iraq? What will the criteria be for any major commitment of troops and resources elsewhere? Will Congress have a say, or will this remain a unilateral decision of the White House?

And let's all just say no — to trashy campaigning.

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